

The Cresco Pardners

BY ROY NORTON

NO one ever knew, or if they did it is forgotten, when, and where, and how old Tom Darrow and his pardner, Jack, first met. But that doesn't matter. It's enough that Tom was one of the finest men and Jack probably the wisest burro that ever took to mining in the Sierra Madres. At least everybody thought so, and what everybody thinks is usually right.

When they first came it wasn't so hard to find pay dirt, as most every gulch had some little cañon feeding it where a good pair of pardners like these could tear a grub-stake from the ground. That is—if the water ran well and supplies could be had.

Tom was always old, so far as any one ever knew. He was old when he came into the country. Not the kind of oldness that makes men think of it, but the kind which makes them hope to sometime be old that way themselves. The kind of oldness where the heart and eyes keep young, and the body can still sturdily bear all it has to do. The kind that makes a man forget the mean things people have done to him and remember the good, and be always ready to help the other fellow with his load as if it were a joy.

Old Tom and Jack had helped lots of other folk, and being of a like type, neither ever mentioned it. It's possible Jack couldn't talk. If so, he didn't need to, because Tom knew what he was thinking about most of the time. People out there, in the place where the desert laps along and draws a compact with the mountains whereby neither is to break over into the other's claim, got so used to the old fellows that they expected one whenever the other was seen. And they were never disappointed.

Most every one knew how they happened to work Cresco Cañon, because Tom told about it. The two pardners were striking out for new diggings, hav-

ing been a little down on their luck. It was one of those mornings after a heavy rain when the fog makes a white sea of the valleys, with islands of the peaks which stick through the top, so the traveller on the roof places of the world looks over it all and pities the people down below where there is no sunshine and nothing but gloom. Tom and Jack had made an early start, because they didn't know how far they would have to go or where the end of the trail might be, and, neither being able to stand as much as in twenty years before, had taken the easiest way.

They were plodding along on a shelf where on one side washed the sea of fog and on the other was a mountain wall. Just a toe-hold of a place that didn't offer any inducements to fall off. Jack's pack must have been so big that it scraped against the wall, or else the rain had weakened the trail in places. The result was the same. Jack got too close to the edge, it gave way beneath him, and over he went. Tom caught two glimpses of white, the first being the pack and the second Jack's belly as he turned over; then there was nothing but a smashing noise down below in the fog.

It's pretty tough on any one to lose a pardner, but Tom felt it a good deal more than most men, because he had more affection than is usual. He dumped his own pack, ran to a place where he could get off the ledge of the mountain, and made his way down into the fog. After tearing nearly all his shirt off on the chaparral, being in something of a hurry, he found the bottom, and later his pardner. Jack was groaning some and occasionally calling for help.

When Tom got within reach Jack raised his head as if to say: "I knew you would come; but it isn't much use. I seem to be about all in." Tom admits talking a heap to Jack, and says that after he got the diamond-hitch flapping, the

pack off, and a hat full of water for him, Jack sort of braced up. But he had sprained himself somewhere in the loins so he couldn't stand on his feet. Tom wasn't the kind to desert anything that suffered, let alone a partner of many years' standing. He rolled all the blankets and put them under Jack's head, then swore a good deal in his way because they couldn't go any farther, and before night had pitched his tent near Jack. It seemed hard luck, so after he had supper and got his pipe going he looked up at the stars and had a long talk with the Lord Almighty, with whom he was on intimate terms.

Tom wasn't exactly a religious sort, but had lived so long with the big hills, and rugged trees, and broad deserts that God seemed pretty likely to be right around in his neighborhood. When you knew Tom real well you believed it, too; he was such a fine, simple, honest old chap, who looked you straight in the eye and seemed above all littleness.

It is singular the way accidents and little things decide for us. Nobody had ever thought enough of that cañon before to give it any attention, but old Tom Darrow found sufficient pay to buy grub for him and Jack, and then, being of the kind that always wants a home, discovered it was the finest place in all the world. Nobody else could see it, of course, but he had a way with him that made everything seem good.

Tom built a cabin, but didn't think of it until he found the pay in the creek was just good enough to keep him there and not to attract any one else to the place. The brook invited him to stay, he said, and told him how good a place it was, and how it would sing little songs to keep him and Jack company.

Jack's back recovered slowly, so Tom had to do the work alone. It was pretty hard work, too, for a bowed back and gnarled hands, but he knocked together a very nice little shack. Had it down in a flat where there were grass and room for flowers around it, the real old kind he liked the best—Daffo Down Dillies and Johnnie Jumpers, which merely tolerated the poppies that in the spring blanketed odd spots with velvety yellow.

Before he got moved into the cabin Jack got well. Maybe he was bluffing

some about having a sore back, but that was hardly believable, because Jack most always held up his end of the work. Tom lost his temper once, but there were reasons for it. He didn't like to kill things, even to eat; but not being able to get where he could buy supplies and not having Jack to help carry them, he swore at necessity and shot a deer. Hunter's stews with dough-boys made of flour were all he had to eat. Jack liked dough-boys, and used to tip the camp-kettle over to get them. Idleness made him sneaking, or else it developed his sense of humor. He used to laugh when Tom caught him at it, and that got on Tom's temper.

Once they had a quarrel. Tom had thrown a rope over a limb, tied the kettle to this, hoisted it out of Jack's reach, and anchored the loose end to the tree trunk. Jack watched how it was done, stood on his hind legs and untied the knot so the kettle fell. Tom caught him eating the dough-boys and boxed his ears. They didn't speak for a week.

Jack couldn't stay away long, though. He remembered too many things. Among others, the time when he had been jumped by a mountain-lion, and Tom, having no other weapon handy, had come to his rescue with a mere hunting-knife. Both had the scars to prove it. Also the lion's skin, for which that animal had no further use.

But about the quarrel. After they had been unfriendly for a week, Tom was panning down by the creek, when he felt something whispering in his ear. It was Jack telling him how sorry he was and explaining that he wanted to see how the pay was running and what there was in the pan. So Tom forgave him.

Boss Parazette happened to be going up that way with an outfit, let Tom have some "grub," and on his next trip brought more. That ended the famine.

As time went on, the flowers grew and waved around the cabin, the Cresco pay streak developed enough to satisfy all the small needs of the partners and they were content—very content. Tom's big, bent shape could be seen working over the sluice-boxes every day, except Sunday; if one happened to be on the trail away up above the spot where, nearly two years before, Jack had fallen off.

In those days the country had some pretty mean half-breeds. Two of them were so desperate that not many men wanted to take the trail after them. Nearly everything they wanted they took, but no great rewards were out for them. They wanted what old Tom had and went for it.

It was along in the fall, when up in the gulches the nights were clear and cold, that they came. The moon was shining down into the cañon and over the flat where the little cabin with its fringe of flowers stood. The half-breeds found the door open, because Tom, who loved and trusted, not a mere few men, but all the world, disdained locks. Tom was sleeping peacefully in his bunk and didn't know they were there, so noiseless had been their entrance, until they threw a blanket over his head.

There had been a day when no two half-breeds could have mastered him, but that was in a time when his six feet one of brawn had the staying power of glorious youth. The bent man of sixty, when it comes to a desperate struggle, feels that his muscles have paid toll to mountain waters, to hardship, and to toil. Tom knew how to fight and was unafraid; but when they unswaddled his head he was fairly down and out—bound hand and foot with the riatas of the frontier, and helpless.

The visitors knew the isolation of the cabin and took their time. They were hungry, so stirred the coals in the old-fashioned fireplace which Tom, being an old-fashioned man, had built with such loving care. They ate of his food, and smoked, and rested, before going further in their mission.

In the mean time old Tom, his limbs immovable and helpless, and grimly speechless, watched them. He wasn't the kind to ask for mercy. He knew the type of men too well and quietly waited and calmly wondered what their next step would be. When they came to the side of his bunk there wasn't a quaver in his voice as he said with customary directness:

"You fellers has the cinch hand. The next move's up to you. Now what in hell do you want?"

"Your poke of dust," was the response, and Tom knew he was up against it.

"Well, you can't have it," was his sturdy reply.

Then they did things to him which it was good the moon couldn't see. There are certain little tricks of the border half-breed that aren't good to look upon. Pizarro may have been great, but if he is responsible for the Mexican strain of cruelty, where he went there was a specially prepared place for him. Nothing else would be hot enough.

It took the visitors a long time. Mere pricking of knives, or drilling through finger-nails into the quick, wouldn't influence old Tom. He shut his jaws hard and did all his swearing through his teeth. Not that he cared for the gold, but it was against his principles to give up. His tormentors worked with much satisfaction, but no luck, for about an hour or two, and made just one mistake. They forgot that he was too old to go through the entire programme for the obstinate. That's the reason why, when they slowly cooked the soles of his bare feet in the fireplace, he became unconscious.

Inasmuch as he couldn't talk any more, they made a last search for his hidden wealth, and found it in just such a place as a simple, trusting old man would have secreted it—in a baking-powder box on a shelf.

Having gone thus far, they knew they would have to go the limit. So one of the men hit poor old Tom a rap over the head with the butt of a Winchester, and the other, to make sure, put a shot through him. When they opened the door to go they were knocked off their feet and run down by something gray that smashed its way past them, realizing in its dumb way that there was devil's work abroad that night.

On the floor, in front of the glowing coals of the fireplace, with the blood trickling over and matting his silvery hair, his poor burned feet turned listlessly outward and his weary old hands relaxed after all their suffering, lay Tom. Six-feet-one of worn-out, wearied-out, out, and tortured-out old-manhood. Jack tried to bring Tom to, and ran over his face a warm muzzle almost as gray and white as the lips into which he tried to caress life and answer. But for once his pardner didn't respond.



Drawn by D. C. Hutchinson

TOM GOT A HAT FULL OF WATER FOR HIM

The half-breeds were surprised by Jack's entrance. One, in a blaze of wrath, started to pull a gun from its holster, but the other restrained him, having more sense and knowing that Jack could carry and work for them. It was about all they could do to conquer the four-footed pard, who fought with teeth and hoofs, striking madly and a devil incarnate with rage. But they bested him and took him away. Away out across the desert to bear his share of slow torture and malignancy.

Sometimes the Lord Almighty seems too busy to look after everything, and then, all of a sudden. He does something that brings you back with a jerk and keeps you from losing the finest thing in all the world—Faith! That's the way it happened with Tom.

When the half-breeds rode away in the night, with Jack a captive, they left behind a tiny spark that grew into a blaze. It was the little spot where they had fired the cabin. Not because they liked bonfires, but just to cover their work in the easiest way. Now there's where the Lord showed how friendly he was to Tom. The fire, after smoldering a while, went out. It wasn't poor old Tom's night to die.

There isn't anybody knows Boss Parazette who doesn't like him, and he naturally likes everybody who does. That's why he got into the habit of dropping off the trail whenever he passed Tom's place in Cresco Cañon. He would leave his pack-train standing idly, get a handhold on the ledge, and come down its face like a panther; and Tom, working over his sluices, with Jack loafing around somewhere near, would suddenly hear: "Hello, there! You dam no-account old cuss! How they comin'?"

Always the answer was the same: "Comin well. Thank God!" Then they would sit quietly, not saying much, that being their way, for several minutes, and Boss would say, "Well, I got to be joggin' erlong." Then in a few minutes the bell-mule's tinkle would wind off into the higher hills, while old Tom would take his hat off, look up somewhere into the sky where he thought the Lord might be about that time, and say: "Dear Lord! Keep your eye on him. He's a bully good feller."

Somewhat earlier than usual on this particular morning there came the "tink-tank, tink-tank" of a bell which stopped and Boss dropped over the cliff to say "Hello!" When he opened the door and saw what was within he didn't say exactly that, but something that sounded similar. He picked the poor, tortured old hulk up, cut the ropes off, felt the heart, bound up the wounds and got busy mighty fast. That was his way. Packs nor other matters didn't count when life was at stake. He did take time to unburden the train, dumping about all he had in the world carelessly alongside the trail, then turned the burros into the valley to shift for themselves. From then on it was a race for life to where he could get surgical care for Tom. And Boss could ride like a fiend when he had any occasion. This was one of them!

There isn't any question but that his hurrying saved Tom's life; but the worst of it was that when Tom got out of a hospital down in San Bernardino, three months later, he was like a boy beginning life all over again. Didn't remember friends, nor pardners, nor anything, let alone his own name. The doctor had hope for his recovery, but that was about all.

Boss took him back up to the cabin on Cresco, and automatically the old man went to work; but not in the same way. He was just a pathetic shell of the old Tom, who neither smiled nor talked, asked nor answered questions, and didn't even swear or pray. He couldn't forget how to mine, the very habit of his hands holding to him after memory was gone; but for him there wasn't any joy in life. He seemed to be missing something. Time and again Boss found him looking at Jack's old bridle in a puzzled, wistful way, or standing around the shed where Jack used to sleep at night.

In the stores where old Tom traded, Jack had been in the habit of demanding free entry; likewise into the cabin. So Tom would always act as if waiting to hear a clatter of hoofs walking leisurely in. But they never came. In those other days Jack used to take his *siesta* in the cabin door, and now Tom missed something around the door-step. In all the old years, before this change came, Tom

had a kind of mournful little whistle with which he used to call Jack when dinner-time came or he wanted company. Boss, with the bells of his lead mule tinkling along the bench above, often heard this plaintive little call which was never answered, habit holding full sway over poor, desolated old Tom.

There was a photograph sharp, who called himself an artist, opened up a shop in Victor, a new place on the desert's border where Tom used to go for supplies. Well, the half-breeds, being prosperous, happened in there one time and had the biggest possible photo taken, arm in arm, and each with a gun in his hand. Tom went over to Victor one day after he got strong, to lay in a sack of flour and a little bacon which Boss was going to take out for him the next day.

Having done his trading, he wandered down the street and came to this photo man's display. He didn't show much interest at first; then suddenly his hand went to his head and clutched through the silver thatch that had barely grown out to cover the place where he had been wounded. His eyes grew wild for a minute, then cold, and had a new look in them. His white brows came together in a frown and his lips tightened to a straight line. His fingers, maimed and scarred, began gripping and ungripping his palms, and folks passing saw something that made them stop and gather in a little cluster around him.

"I know who I am," he said, just as if that had been bothering him for a mighty long time or some one had disputed him. "I know who I am. I'm Tom Darrow! Damn you—I'm Tom Darrow!" Then he straightened up until he looked like the Tom Darrow some of the boys had known when first he came—the way he must have looked twenty years before.

"What's happened to me? Why am I here in Victor and where in hell is Jack and them greasers? Tell me quick!" He reached out his great steadily clutching hands to the shoulders of a man whom, for the first time in months, he knew.

The man told him. Tom didn't say anything in reply. All those around wanted to ask questions, but were afraid to. Tom looked into one face after an-

other, then walked into the gallery. When he came out there was something bulging in his shirt-front where he had thrust it through. It was one of the big photos.

About an hour later he did something that wasn't usual with the old-time Darrow. He got friendly, very friendly, with a crowd of Mexicans that were camped in the creek bottom below the town. He bought drinks. He sang songs. He essayed a jig on the sanded floor of a saloon. He was, in fact, a comrade of a class with which he never associated in former days. His old border Spanish worked overtime and with amazing fluency.

This kept up for two days, while his old friends were scandalized and apparently forgotten; but in the mean time he showed, at intervals, a photograph of two "other fellers" he wanted to hear about very much.

Into the camp, at the beginning of the second night, came two Mexicans who had worked across the desert from far above and were headed around for Rabbit Springs. They had seen the "other fellers" whom Tom sought, in a half-way station up near Dos Palmas.

Tom waited not for the morning, and the white trail across the sands saw him riding—steadily riding—to Dos Palmas.

It was night, too, when, in a shack wherein they felt security, two men were awakened by a battering on the door and its breaking down immediately after. They sprang from their bunks and blankets to behold, outlined against the stars behind and their dim candle in front, a cold, deadly, white-haired figure of vengeance. They recognized him.

There are times when the first thing a man does is to reach for his gun, provided of course he has any sense. This was the time for the half-breeds to grab, and they had sense enough for that, be sure. The first one whose hand fell on a pistol butt didn't get time to raise it; he died too quick. The other fired, but wasn't a good shot. Before he could shoot again the pistol had been wrenched from his hand, he was seized like a thing of no weight, lifted high into the air and thrown half-way across the room, to fall on the still quivering body of his comrade.

Above him in the candle-light towered a giant. Not the old Tom Barrow of kindness, whom he had tortured, maimed, and left for dead. Not the forgiving old Tom Darrow of Cresno Cañon, but Tom Darrow who had dropped off forty years and with them the mantle of age's tenderness. A man who was ready to kill the moaning thing before him as remorselessly as he would a mad wolf.

There came a silence so intense that one could almost hear the burning of the candle, which, in the soft night draught through the open door, sent the flame aquiver like a living thing seeking to escape the clutch of the wick. In its weaving it sent a monstrous shadow writhing on the wall—that of a man with a poised gun.

The dying desperado finished his dissolution, and with a long-drawn sigh became tragically quiet. The other arose to a half-sitting, half-leaning posture on the bunk, resting on one elbow, his other arm, broken in that terrific throw, dangling awkwardly and his eyes staring with wide terror at this white-haired apparition.

Tom Darrow was thinking. The time stretched into minutes which seemed ages. The wounded outlaw slipped to the floor on his knees, gently, furtively, as if afraid that any sudden movement would hasten the end. He put his one good hand out as a shield before him, its fingers trembling and appealingly open. He looked into the eyes of the man above him, but therein read no mercy. This was to be an execution, not a murder, nor was there appeal. And, coward that he was, the half-breed knew that the end was there and this his time to pray.

In mumbling Spanish he began an appeal to the long-forgotten Virgin for mercy, while the young Tom listened and suddenly grew old and became the old Tom again. He wanted to kill this thing before him, but it was already hurt, and—well—there floated through his head one of his favorite passages. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. I will repay." A spider, aroused by the light, came swinging down on his airy web, and a cricket from his refuge in the wall began a complaining song. From away off in the distance came the harsh, strident bray

of a mule. It recalled Jack. Poor Jack, his pardner!

"Damn you!" said Tom to the kneeling man before him. "God knows I ought to kill you; but I can't." And with this the full scores of years were back on him again and the forgiving old Tom Darrow had returned.

"There's one thing you've got to answer first," he said as the outlaw started to arise. "What did you do with my burro?"

"By the living Lord I've a mind to kill you for that," he said when the answer came that for nearly a hundred miles poor Jack had been goaded beneath his pack, and then, when strength failed, left lying on the face of the desert to die.

The younger Tom Darrow threatened to come back with all his hot youth, the pistol weaved uncertainly in the air, the outlaw fell back upon his knees and once more took to prayer. Again there was an instant's hesitancy.

Without a word Tom picked up and smashed the weapons in the cabin, while the half-breed waited. Then Tom took one more look at the man on the floor and the form on the bunk, turned slowly on his heel, walked out of the cabin and into the moonlight where his tired horse awaited.

The young Tom Darrow had gone forever and old Tom Darrow rode away.

Three days later, when Boss came down the trail he was hailed by old Tom. He wanted to buy a burro, "not bein' anxious to give other friends a heap of trouble totin grub up thar" for him; but Boss found Tom was going to be mighty hard to suit. There didn't seem to be any burros in the world good enough. So Boss declined the latest mission.

"I think you better go down to the cabin with me," Tom said, in his slow way. "I got somethin' to show you, because you been pretty good to me."

What Tom had to show was a new can filled with nuggets. He had struck it strong on Cresco and wanted Boss to stake for himself the next claim. Boss did and it made him—but that's nothing, except about gold, and, after all, gold doesn't amount to much in this world. Maybe it will in heaven for paving-blocks. If so it will save a heap of digging and will throw a lot of mining angels out of jobs.



Drawn by D. C. Hutchinson

IN MUMBLING SPANISH HE BEGAN AN APPEAL

However, Tom went down to San Bernardino to buy a burro. Joe Lord had a corral filled with them, and ran them around a little, but none of them would do. The fact was Tom looked for a burro like his pardner had been, and that kind weren't common. They made him heart-sick—this band did—and the more he looked the more he knew there was no burro living like the one that had fought for him and then died on the cruel sands. He felt at last that he was alone in the world and bereaved. Nothing but a burro, after all, but something he loved.

"Joe," he said, as it all came to him, "I guess I don't want to buy nothin' after all. I'm an old man livin' in a dream. I thought I wanted a plain, onery burro to pack things; but it wasn't that, after all. I wanted to buy a friend, and it don't matter how much gold a man has, that's one thing he can't buy. Leastwise in a mule-corral." He laughed to hide a sob.

Joe understood, and old Tom read it in his eyes. That unloosed him again. "You see, Joe, I ain't never had no wife, nor no children, nor nothin' to love real close, except Jack, and we'd got

used to each other. Why, I could call him to me like this—"

His lips puckered and there issued a long-drawn melancholy note. From the centre of the corral arose a wild commotion. Heels, teeth and fore hoofs were swirling. From out the ruck, at the sound of the whistle, came a little gray burro who frantically rushed to the corral and thrust his head through an opening. Tom dropped to his knees, took the big shaggy face in his arms, babbled into the ungainly ears and was not ashamed of tears.

Joe refused to take money. The Lord will repay him, too, for that! Hotels don't take burros as guests. That's why, as the dusk dropped down over San Bernardino Valley and the night was warm with beauty, as if God had mantled it with love and kindness, a white-haired old man, bent and gnarled but very happy, tramped into the foot-hills to camp. And close at his heels, as if fearing to lose sight of him, trotted a tired little old burro, whose heart ached for the cabin, and the homely flowers, and the singing brook of Cresco Cañon. Tom and Jack were going home.